

[Just Another Guy Working]

Roaldus Richmond Recorded in Writers' Section Files

DATE: Sep 14 1940 JUST ANOTHER GUY WORKING

"I work in the shed," Dave Bernie said, "It's pretty good, but my brother is the one makes the money. He's on the road — a salesman. A good man on the road makes ten or eleven thousand a year, maybe better than that. You don't make nothing like that in the sheds. I'm a polisher and I get eight-fifty a day. That'd be pretty good if a man worked every day. I've been luckier than some. I work most all the time. Over the holidays we get three weeks off. I don't mind that. I'm glad to lay off that long. Especially when I know I'm going back to work January 9th, and we'll work right through then. Right through the big Memorial Day rush next spring. Then we'll get a few weeks off again, after Memorial Day."

Bernie was a thick-set Scotsman with a broad ruddy face that dimpled when he grinned, he was always bareheaded and his brown hair stood in a tumbled shook. His hands were graceful and well-kept.

"All I've done since I stopped work is eat and drink," Bernie went on. "Today I was supposed to tend the house. My wife works for the paper, you know. That's a big help too. It takes two people working to make a decent living nowadays. I'm supposed to get supper tonight; but I guess I ain't going to make it. I'll probably eat at the diner. This in my vacation and I ain't going to spoil it by cooking and cleaning house. 2 "I take a few drinks every day anyway. When I ain't working I take a few extra ones. But I don't get drunk. I always keep eating, see? If you keep eating you can drink and it won't hurt you.

"We got a good shed to work in. We got a cement floor instead of dirt. Some of the sheds are pretty cold and damp, but ours is o.k. The thermostat keeps the temperature the same, winter and summer, seventy degrees. The lights are good and it's cleaner than most

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sheds. It's all right working there. The suctions are good. They suck the dust away from the cutting tools, you know. Of course polishing you don't got no dust anyway. But the way it is now the other fellow don't get nowhere near so much dust either.

"There's seventy-five manufacturers in Barre City. In Barre District — that takes in Barre, Montpelier, Northfield and Waterbury—there's ninety-three manufacturing firms. On the Hill, up round Websterville and Graniteville, there's six quarry companies. The hill is where we get the stone from. Them quarries are big, hundreds of feet deep. That Hill is all cut up with quarries and piled with grout. You see it from some places it looks like the ruins of an old fort or something. The towns on the Hill look just like mining towns. Wooden houses thrown together fast and not kept up too good. But you'd be surprised at the insides of some of them homes. Furnished good with everything, comfortable, clean, nice to live in. There's money up on the Hill. But I wouldn't care for quarry work. I'd rather be in the sheds than down in them holes. 3 "In the shed when the stones get to me they've been sawed to about the right size and smoothed down by the surface-cutters. After they've set in the bed I put the polisher on them. It's a big machine, a big disk you move around the face of the stone. You use different abrasives in order, one after another. You guide the disk with a wheel. It's a slow work; everything in granite business is slow. With stuff like that you can't work very fast. After the machine sometimes the edges and corners are finished by hand polishing. You can't get it all with the machine. After it's all polished the stone goes to the sandblast room or the hand-carvers and letterers. They all get the same pay, eight-fifty a day, except some of the best carvers and letter cutters get more. They used to get a lot more, the good ones did.

"But like I told you the guys on the road make the money. Today the money is in selling no matter what the line of business is. You don't need to know nothing to sell either. You just got to have that gift of gab. Lots of nerve and plenty of gab. The salesmen get a ten percent commission. If they sell a job for thirty-five thousand they get thirty-five hundred for their cut. If they sell one big job like that along with the smaller pieces they've got a good

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year's pay. Nowadays they don't sell so many big mausolumse any more, but they still sell some big pieces.

“My brother sold Mrs. Palmer — remember Palmer Method Writing they teach in the schools? Well, it was that family. She wasn't interested at first. She didn't intend to buy nothing. But my brother used to be a draftsman. He sketched the 4 stone all out for her, showed her just what it would look like. She got so interested she ordered it off him. It was a big job. He didn't need to work no more that year.

“If they was going to cut that table in stone, say, and the company figured it was a three thousand dollar job. They add ten percent to that, and that's the salesman's commission. That's the way they figure it out. You see they get a nice cut even on a small job. You ain't selling magazines when you sell granite! But it burns me up to think of some of them dumb bastards knocking off over ten thousand a year. My brother don't make that much. He did once but he don't now. But he still makes a good living all right.

“I think I'll go to Boston for New Years on the excursion. You can got a round-trip ticket for about eight bucks. That's just about one-way fare, the regular rate. You can get a good hotel down there for a dollar-and-a-half. The Bradford's all right; I like it just as good as the Statler. The Bradford's right across from the Met, a good location. I think I'll go down, take in a hockey game, see some shows. I won't spend no more there than I will just hanging round here. It does a fellow good to got away once in awhile, sure it does. If I hang round here I'll spend ten-fifteen bucks a day — and do nothing. I know some people down there I'd like to see, too. There's some fellows I used to cut stone with in Quincy. It's good to see old friends this time of year. If we get together down there we'll have a hell of a time, I know that. Might as well celebrate when you can. It's a long grind through the winter from January to the end of May. 5 “Yeah, this town looks pretty busy through the holidays. It always looks kind of busy — busier than it is. There's always people on the streets, and you can't find a place to park a car. The stores do pretty good here, just like the beer joints and bars. There's always money circulating around here. Sometimes when the granite

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business is slow you wonder where the money comes from. I guess most of them got a little saved up to fall back on. I couldn't spend so much myself, but my wife's got that newspaper job. She goes round gathering up local news you know. All about who visits who, and who does where, stuff like that. It's foolish stuff, but it helps us out a lot. We ain't got any kids either, that makes it easier, I'd like to have kids. I'd like a boy anyway, but — Well, we can't have them, that's all. No use thinking about it.

"I wasn't born in this country but it's the only country I know. I don't remember Scotland. My folks came from around Edinburgh. That's where Rhind lived, you know, the fellow that designed the Robert Burns Statue. He never saw it though. A Barre stonecutter named Novelli did the carving, and Eli Corti, the one who got shot, cut the panels in the base. I was just a baby when we came across, too small to remember. My father was a stone mason over there — a good carver. My mother always wanted to go back to Scotland. She talked about it a lot, but they never got back there. Now they're both dead. My father died first. My mother went pretty quick after that. I think it was about 1900 when we came over. We came right to Barre. I grew up here and learned the trade here.

"The granite workers get along all right with the other 6 people in the City. At first, the old-timers I mean, used to keep more to themselves. It was natural to do that way at first. But now they mix right in like anybody else. Lots of the younger ones have gone into business here, and lots of them are doctors and lawyers now. Their folks came over to cut stone, and the money they made in granite started the sons off in business or educated them to be lawyers or doctors. Naturally the granite people are a class by themselves like any people who work the same trade. But they ain't cut off from the rest of the people any more... Maybe some of the bigshots think they're better than the stonecutters, but the stonecutters feel the same way about them too. Stonecutters are pretty proud and independent, and they don't kneel down to nobody.

"You see it in the sheds. Lots of the owners and all the bosses started out cutting stone themselves. It's different from most kinds of business. The bosses don't bother you much.

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They leave you alone to do your work. They don't try to drive a man; they know it ain't no use. Stonecutters won't stand for it. In the sheds every man knows his work and does his job. He don't need nobody standing over him, and the bosses know it.

"We work eight hours a day, five days a week. That gives us forty hours a week, and my week's pay is forty-two-fifty. It ain't enough either, but it's more than you can get in any other line around here.

"It ain't bad in the sheds. The noise is the worst thing. It makes me deaf. It's a hall of a racket with the saws grinding back and forth. You know it takes an hour to saw four inches into granite. The drills are going all the time, and 7 them big cranes smashing overhead. You get a vibration from the air-pressure machines. Jack-hammers sound like machine guns. At quitting time when the noise stops your head feels funny inside, the ringing stays in your ears, but you get used to it.

"Looking down one of them long stonesheds you see every man bent over his own job, minding his own business. You see that every man knows his own business and tends to it. The bosses are there to check up and keep things going smooth. Maybe they stop here or there to talk with a cutter about his stone. But mostly they let you alone to do your work. It's the best way, the only way in the granite business.

"There was some anarchists here a long time ago. I was still just a kid. Most people here don't talk much about it. I've heard stories though. A man named Galleani ran an anarchist newspaper here. They say he's in Italy now, one of Mussoline's ministers or something over there. Anyway he was arrested here. It was mostly on account of a riot he caused before in Paterson, New Jersey, when the strike in the silk mills was on. Galleani was arrested there after about forty men got wounded in a riot, but he jumped his bail — I think it was \$5,000. The next they heard of him he was in Barre. He was arrested once up here, they say, at a Sunday beer picnic where they got to fighting. Women fighting along with the men. Galleani was there and they got him for breach of peace.

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“There was a lot of trouble between the anarchists and socialists here. I don't know much about it. I don't even know the difference between them. But I've heard of shooting 8 scrapes, and I guess it was in one of them that Corti got shot. They say when Galleani's newspaper burned out they found a picture of the man who killed President McKinley, after the fire. I don't know how true all this stuff is. I know they come and arrested Galleani and took him to Paterson. That was sometime about 1906. And now they claim he's in Italy with Mussolini.

“There ain't any more of that stuff round here that I know of. If there is they keep it pretty quiet. I never got worked about politics much anyway. I'm a citizen, sure, and I pay my taxes and vote. But I ain't crazy over politics. I'm just another guy working for a living, trying to get by and have a little fun too while I'm here. I got a good home and a nice wife and some good friends. I got a pretty good job. I wouldn't swap places with Mussolini or Hitler — or Roosevelt either. I ain't a big shot and I don't want to be. None of that stuff, not for me.

“What burns me up is the way them politicians in Washington keep fighting among themselves when the country ought to be getting ready to fight Hitler. He won't stop with England, no more than he stopped with France or Poland. He won't stop nowhere until he's licked. Them guys in Washington ought to forget they're Republicans and Democrats. They ought to forget all that crap and be Americans for a while now.”